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Painting with a Purpose

BY BRIAN MANLEY WITH KERI SUAREZ

A 50-foot long white and salmon colored wall loomed before me. I had about a day, 15 students and no paint or paintbrushes to complete a Noah's Ark themed mural on the wall of an orphanage in northern Jordan. Overwhelmed, to say the least, I jumped into the project feet-first with full confidence that God was in control.

I, along with several other members of my group, had been part of the Tell Hesban archaeological excavation in Jordan prior to journeying to northern Jordan to participate in a week-long experience known as Abraham Path. It's a walking and cultural tourism route following the footsteps of Abraham. Part of the experience involves a day of community service. We were scheduled to pick up trash in a forested picnic area, but when our tour guide, Mahmoud, learned I was an artist he asked if I would be willing to lead a mural painting project at a local orphanage.

Fifteen Andrews University students, along with a few from Missouri State University, were interested in the project. We quickly met to discuss our plan, decided upon a Noah's Ark theme and created a few concept sketches before retiring for the night.

Large murals take days, weeks, sometimes months to complete. We had a single day. Did they have paint? Enough paintbrushes? How big was the wall? Had the wall been primed? There were so many unknowns. I prayed for wisdom and God's intervention in this project, one that had many implications well beyond a painting: cross-cultural bridge-building, interfaith ministry, children and orphan ministry, and an important opportunity for all of us as international visitors (or tourists) to serve a local community.

The next morning we piled into three taxis and headed across town, arriving at the orphanage by about 10 a.m. We were taken to our project headquarters where I saw the wall, which had been painted a two-tone white and salmon color, probably several years before. The staff brought out a box containing a few old quart-size cans of half-used paint. It was



Painting the Noah's Ark themed mural turned out to be a miraculous two-day accomplishment.

crusty, dry and completely unusable.

I took a deep breath and set several of the students to work on the wall. Using sticks of charcoal, they began to sketch out the ark and animals. Meanwhile, an orphanage staff member and I set out in search of a paint store. We came across a hardware store that sold paint, but another challenge quickly presented itself. Neither of us spoke

much Arabic, so in what I can only describe as some interesting linguistics acrobatics, we managed to communicate what colors we needed. Amazingly, he had most of the colors available.

When we arrived back with the paint, the sketches were complete. Forming small groups, we started painting right away. We completed the main part of the mural in about six hours. The following day we returned and spent four hours putting on the finishing touches.

Along the way, we all became close friends with a number of the orphan children and the staff members. We ate together, laughed together and played soccer together. They shared their unique life stories with us and we shared ours with them.

It turned out to be a miraculous two-day accomplishment. But, it was more than that. Reflecting on the project during our taxi ride home the second day, the comment was made, "Imagine, a group of Protestant Christians painting a biblically-themed mural in an Argentinean Catholic orphanage, surrounded by a Muslim community."

In some ways, all three groups were positively impacted. I know I certainly was.

Brian Manley is an assistant professor of art in the Department of Art & Design at Andrews University. He shared this story with Keri Suarez, media relations specialist, Office of Integrated Marketing & Communication.